DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 760 SO 018 757

AUTHOR Feldman, Marvin
TITLE Education, Ethics, and the Ultimate Peril of Technology.
PUB DATE 21 Aug 85
NOTE 11p.; Speech given before the faculty of the Fashion Institute of Technology (New York, NY, August 21, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *General Education; Social Stratification; Social Values; *Technology; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS Scientific Revolution

ABSTRACT

This paper calls for the reunification of liberal and vocational education, arguing that, in a technological egalitarian society, all young people should have both. The paper's central point is that technology is the enemy of the social continuity that makes stability and self-development possible. The signs of social discontinuity recently documented by social critics are the marks of an era of rapid technological change. The U.S. scientific revolution has created a discontinuity between one generation and the next, and in the words of the philosopher J. Glenn Gray, "the scientific revolution has so altered the pattern of our lives that the experience of one generation is no longer very relevant to the next." Educators should reunite what has been artificially separated. Education can provide the essential bulwark against the forces of impersonality and standardization. Vocational educators are leading the way for the reunification of liberal and vocational education. (SM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED293760

EDUCATION, ETHICS, AND THE ULTIMATE PERIL OF TECHNOLOGY

BY

MARVIN FELDMAN

Fashion Institute of Technology
7th Avenue at 27th Street
New York, N.Y. 10001-5992

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

MARVIN FELDMAN

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SO018754

Remarks to the
Faculty
August 21, 1985

Marvin Feldman
Fashion Institute
of Technology
227 West 27th Street
New York, NY 10001

Education, Ethics, and the Ultimate Peril of Technology

As you all know by now, I use these semiannual occasions to do two things. In the first place, I try to give you all as accurate a sense as I can of where we stand as an institution. Just as President Reagan gives an annual State of the Union message, and Governor Cuomo his State of the State message, I give you a briefer, less ponderous State of the College message. We are all embarked on this vessel together, and I think you deserve to know from time to time how seaworthy it is.

I'm glad to say that the state of the college is somewhere between very good and terrific. I hasten to add that we are not now and never will be trouble free. It is one of those cruel cosmic inequities that the better an institution is, the better it must become. But I do believe that in our forty years we have at last achieved a kind of momentum. We have set and achieved high standards for so long that high performance has become second nature. We've grown accustomed to excellence.

Benjamin Franklin tells us in his Autobiography that all through his long life he kept charts on himself. At the end of each day, he rated his behavior harshly according to a dozen qualities he revered: humility, geniality, piety, and the like. I have my own list of institutional qualities.

I do not rate F.I.T. according to its piety, but from time to time, I keep score on certain other vital institutional signs: quality of instruction, the degree of cross-disciplinary integration, financial health, the quality of the physical environment, and rates of attrition and placement. These are more or less easy to measure. There are other important qualities that are more elusive but equally important: vitality, strength of purpose, institutional confidence.

I'm glad to say that by all these measures we are doing extremely well. We continue to improve and enlarge our physical plant. Our attrition rate is one of the lowest in the land and our placement rate one of the highest. Our financial base is stronger than it has ever been. We've come to understand the complex subtle underlying considerations that influence our sources of financial support. And as we've come to understand them better, we've been able to control them better. We've thus achieved a kind of stability in a political atmosphere that is inherently somewhat unstable. The State increased its proportion of support dramatically this year, at least temporarily offsetting the growing shortfall created as we grow faster than the level of city and corporate support.

We have the best faculty in the world. And, because we're growing, we have the opportunity to make it even better. This year, for example, we'll be hiring a dozen new faculty members. We're looking for young scholars with solid backgrounds, a strong commitment to teaching, and an informed enthusiasm for the particular mission of this institution. Reviving an old neglected tradition, I intend to interview every recommended candidate.

I need not tell you that our first class of graduate students will begin their programs this fall. Who would have believed a dozen years ago, we would be offering an M.A.? We have assembled a splendid adjunct faculty from F.I.T. and from outside, and an equally impressive student body from a variety of colleges, walks of life, and age groups.

We continue with curricular innovation. Last semester the chairpersons of the Business and Technology Division, working closely with Deans Rittenberg and Weinman, conceived a broadened upper division program in marketing.

Many of the generic marketing courses currently offered will be maintained. Several generic courses will be added with a number of more sharply defined specializations in sales and merchandise management, marketing communications, textiles, cosmetics, and home furnishings. The plan will be perfected this year and installed in the fall of 1986.

Several faculty members spent last year developing an upper division program in the restoration of wood, ceramic, and metal objects, which will surely attract A.A.S. degree students from F.I.T. and from other institutions. John Stair, Director of Restoration at Sotheby's, will serve as our external advisor and Professor Hugh Crean will oversee the program's development this year.

Other faculty members from Departments in the Art and Design and Business and Technology Divisions have been working together to expand our offerings in media production and marketing, and television advertising media, as good a program as we now offer in print.

We are exploring the need to offer a new degree program in public relations and to reexamine the giftware industry again. So we're in good shape.

Our only major problem is space--and we'll solve that one way or another. I'm haunted only by the knowledge that it will be harder to stay here than it was to get here! That's where we stand, as I see it. Complacency is our major enemy.

And that brings me to the second perennial purpose of these encounters: to try to raise our collective sights a little, to sketch an ideal, to think through with you the elements of a sense of institutional direction, and to identify the issues for the last President's Forum, which this November will consider education.

These are times of great restlessness and discontent in American education--times when more and more people are sensing something elementally wrong with education, but with few proposing solutions that capture the imagination of the education community. Where does our responsibility as educators begin and where does it end? What is the right relationship between liberal and vocational instruction? We cannot exercise our grave responsibilities as educators if we do not think through exactly what they are.

These remarks will complete a kind of trilogy which I began a year ago on the eve of our 40th anniversary--designed to raise some of the most elemental questions about the nature of our task as a great growing urban educational center for working people.

I called my first statement "Design, Technique and the Perils of Technology." It was a discussion of some of the implications of the stunning increases in the effectiveness of machines for making things. I traced quickly through history man's abiding and legitimate concern that technology might overwhelm humanness. The question is whether we use technology in ways that will degrade and obliterate humanness or enhance and enrich it. And the answer to that crucial question will depend on how well we succeed in imposing our human intention on the machine through design.

My January meditations I called "History, Communications, and Some Further Perils of Technology." Those remarks carried this conversation--this discussion of how to keep culture alive in an age of technology--over into the realm of communications. Here the peril takes a somewhat different form: improved communications technique can degrade content. This imposes on us as educators a need for a compensating emphasis on awareness and understanding--on meaning, on moral implication, on cultural context.

Today I'm closing this mini-series with some thoughts on "Education, Ethics and the Ultimate Peril of Technology." There's no doubt about the ultimate peril of technology, no need to be coy about revealing it. Technology is the enemy of social continuity--that priceless sense of place and context which makes stability and self-development possible.

The literature of social criticism overflows with eloquent expressions of this peril. Listen to George Kennan: "wherever the past ceases to be the great and reliable reference book of human problems, wherever, above all, the experience of the father becomes irrelevant to the trials and searchings of the son, there the foundations of man's inner health and stability begin to crumble, insecurity and panic begin to take over, conduct becomes erratic and aggressive".

These, unfortunately, are the marks of an era of rapid technological change. Alexis De Tocqueville, that brilliant young French nobleman, came to America in the 1830's to study our prisons, but in time he wrote Democracy in America, that stunningly perceptive and prophetic description of the meaning of the American experience. But while we are forever enthusiastically quoting Tocqueville, we forget that his prognosis for America was equivocal if not pessimistic. For the first time in human history, Tocqueville wrote in the last chapter of Democracy in America, "the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future; the mind of man wanders in obscurity." And he was writing in 1840 only about the American achievement of an unaccustomed political and social equality.

The American scientific revolution was still to come, creating a nearly absolute discontinuity between one generation and the next. Philosopher J. Glenn Gray said of it, "the scientific revolution has so altered the pattern of our lives that the experience of one generation is no longer very relevant to the next." As a result, our common body of experience and belief has dwindled dangerously. The social glue is coming loose.

This phenomenon is chronicled in a compelling way in a book I have been reading all summer. Published this spring, it is called, Habits of the Heart. The authors, a group of young sociologists, borrowed the title phrase from Tocqueville who found such hope as he had in an unspoken commitment to community--a habit of the heart--he found in the young republic. Now, the authors find, that commitment has given way to a shallow and self-serving individualism.

In a culture built on separation and specialization, Wendell Berry writes, "the old union of beauty, goodness, and truth is broken." The happiness people long for is a private happiness--and that at the level of physical sensation. Life becomes, as Shakespeare wrote, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Or, as Tocqueville wrote, "each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart." Strangers who find themselves alone together in elevators almost always speak of the weather--perhaps because that is the only thing they can be reasonably confident they experience in the same way. Meteorology is becoming our only binding universal. Organizations are finding it more and more necessary to bring in experts to help co-workers to communicate and to listen to each other.

Eva Brann in Paradoxes of Education in a Republic points out that college teachers are finding it harder and harder to find a single book or even a play of Shakespeare that everyone in the class knows.

The consequences are hair-raising. It is a central paradox of the human condition that individuality cannot be developed without a prior experience of community. Without that experience, the individual feels isolated and powerless--alone and helpless--buffeted by large mysterious forces that he or she can neither understand nor control. The individual feels unimportant and insignificant, and easily manipulated by those who understand power. The only possible commitment is to a tiresome search for an image acceptable to others. Imagine by contrast, the great leverage of an individual linked to interconnecting chains of human cooperation. A single writer, for example, can draw on vast research resources, write a book, distribute it through an infrastructure manned by hundreds of specialists, and conceivably reach an audience of millions.

In the same way, an individual linked to an intellectual tradition can find great solace and encouragement. We need not feel isolated and alone. We can escape the desperate feeling of transitory futility. Emerson said we study the classical period in part for the reassuring feeling of an immense longevity.

But now this essential continuity has been interrupted. The authors of Habits of the Heart trace the evolution of the nature of higher education in America. In the nineteenth century, the effort was built on the idea that the purpose of higher learning was to transmit a single, unified cultural heritage. It was widely understood that the task of institutions of higher education was to produce men and women of learning who would have "an uplifting and unifying influence on society." Literature, the arts--even science --were seen simply as specialized parts of a single, integral tradition of learning. A required senior course in moral philosophy, usually taught by the college president, was intended to integrate the various fields of learning and to relate them to the specific business of living a good and generous life. (Incidentally, this is not a threat.)

That comfortable unity was torn asunder by the scientific revolution. As Thomas Haskell has put it, the specialized scientist was obliged to exchange his general citizenship in the whole society for membership in some specialized community of the competent. As in the legend of Babel, we began to speak specialized languages, incomprehensible to those of other specialists.

The scientific revolution altered practical affairs in an equally wrenching way. We had lived in small communities and pursued certain "callings." We suddenly became an industrial-corporate society organized around competing professional careers. Pollsters find that most Americans share two common longings: to work for themselves and to live in a small town. That's simple nostalgia for the way things were in the mid-nineteenth century--before the scientific revolution.

The scientific revolution destroyed the intimate, unquestioned connection between the physical and the metaphysical. Urbanization removed us from nature. As goods came to be produced by machines we could not, as Gray writes, "project ourselves into their nature. We lose our sense of belonging to the world about us." Our relationships to things become abstract. Even our designs begin to suffer "the useful and the esthetic; the formal and the functional; the emotional and the intellectual tend to get separated from each other. And with these separations we cannot penetrate things very far."

And that circumstance, that separation or disjunction of the literal and scientific from the ethical and moral, defines the task of today's educators--defines <u>our</u> task. We must reunite what has been artificially separated. We must reunite the practical and the theoretical, the utilitarian and the esthetic, the particular and the general. We must re-integrate the educational enterprise. We must, as Gray says, "provide the essential bulwark against the forces of impersonality, standardization, rootlessness and discontinuity which threaten us today."

John Dewey, in the popular memory's cruel shorthand, is remembered as the apostle of practical education--of "learning by doing." We most remember his disgust at a school where young people were taught to swim without going into the water. (We at F.I.T. understand that part of his educational philosophy.) But Dewey had a much larger vision--of an education suited to a nation committed to equality, a nation eager to lift the burden of working people through technology and a nation bound together by shared commitments to continuity and community.

It was Dewey who pointed out that liberal can mean two things. It can mean free or it can mean generous. Dewey's vision of a liberal education for working people was of an education generous in spirit. He meant an education that builds a capacity to be part of the experience of others, an eagerness to explore new worlds, a willingness to make intellectual and emotional commitments for their own sake and not because they are practical or profitable in some self-serving way.

The need to somehow harmonize the practical and the metaphysical in education is an ancient concern. "What should be the aim of our training?" Aristotle asked. "The useful in life? Virtue? Higher knowledge? All these opinions have been entertained." But now it is principally expressing itself in the sterile controversy between vocational and liberal educators. And the system, torn between conflicting goals, is failing growing numbers of students.

The system at all levels has become two systems--the "liberal" and the "vocational" --at war with each other for decades. This debate is a pathetic manifestation of the disunion of technique from morality of the concrete from the abstract, of the practical from the spiritual, of appearances from intrinsic values.

As you know, I am devoting as much energy as I can spare from the affairs of the college to a kind of one-man national crusade for the re-unification of liberal and vocational education. I believe we have somehow mistaken a both/and question for an either/or question. It is not a question whether young people should have technical or liberal education, or whether some young people are suited for one and some for the other. All young people should have both technical and liberal education. One without the other in a technological egalitarian society is grotesque. I may be making some progress. In a lecture last spring to the legislative leadership, sponsored by the Rockefeller Institute of Government, I proposed that the State take the initiative in devising concrete proposals for the integration of technical and liberal education. As a result, they've asked me to present a plan for a blue-ribbon commission of distinguished vocational and liberal educators to develop detailed proposals. I expect we'll proceed in a few weeks' time.

Meanwhile, here at F.I.T., I hope we will continue together the search for ways to integrate the practical with the ethical and spiritual--with the unpractical. I am convinced that if vocational and liberal elements are ever to be re-united--re-integrated--in American educational practice, it will be because we in vocational education lead the way.

Thank you.